ANNALS OF ENTERTAINMENT

RUPAUL DOESN'T SEE HOW THAT'S ANY OF YOUR BUSINESS

The drag star brought the form mainstream, and made an empire out of queer expression. Now he fears "the absolute worst."

By Ronan Farrow

March 1, 2024

"I'm up against the status quo," RuPaul says. "There is pain in that." Photograph by Danielle Levitt for The New Yorker

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Recently, the drag star RuPaul Andre Charles has taken to falling asleep while watching the documentary series "Secrets of Great British Castles." He's seen every episode, knows every turn in the bloody histories of landmarks like Dover Castle and the Tower of London. "The headline is: Humans have been horrible since the beginning of time," RuPaul told me. "And the human ego can justify these terrible things that people do. You know, these kings, Henry VIII, and Edward II, and all these people who have just decimated hundreds of thousands of people because their feelings were hurt."

RuPaul is braced for conflict. "I'm fearing the absolute worst," he said. "We are moments away from fucking civil war. All the signs are there." He continued, "Humans on this planet are in the cycle of destruction. I am plotting a safety net." He was referring to a fortified compound being constructed on the sixty-thousand-acre ranch of his husband, Georges LeBar, in Wyoming. "I wouldn't call it a bunker," he said. But it is designed to withstand calamity. "It's a lot of concrete and a lot of things. I keep thinking about these castles that I'm going to bed to."

I met RuPaul at the end of January in Britain, at a rented cottage in Windsor and at Pinewood Studios, nearby, where movie franchises including James Bond and Harry Potter have been filmed. He was shooting "RuPaul's Drag Race UK," one of nineteen regional variations of his competition reality show, while promoting a memoir, which will be published this week, called "The House of Hidden Meanings." (The title comes from a friend's comment during an acid trip. "After the drugs wore off," he writes, "I realized it was nonsense.") RuPaul now hosts seven versions of "Drag Race," a pastiche of competition

reality-television tropes that follows participants, in and out of drag, through eclectic challenges including costume-making, lip-synching, and standup comedy (testing "charisma, uniqueness, nerve, and talent"—the resulting acronym is representative of the show's bawdy sense of humor). He has taken an underground, subversive form and made it so mainstream that Nancy Pelosi has appeared as a guest on the show. The sixteenth season of the U.S. version, currently airing, has some of its highest ratings yet, and RuPaul recently won his fourteenth Emmy, making him the most decorated competition host and the most decorated person of color in the award's history.

"Drag Race" often focusses on competitors who are profoundly marginalized. Almost all the drag queens on the show are queer, and many are people of color, who come from backgrounds where they faced homophobia, racism, or transphobia. For them, drag can be a lifeline, affording a sense of community and an opportunity to transmute stigmatized traits into something exuberant. "It's armor, 'cause you're putting on a persona. So the comments are hitting something you created, not you," Jinkx Monsoon, who has won two seasons of the show, told me. "And then it's my sword, because all of the things that made me a target make me powerful as a drag queen."

Yet, as "Drag Race" has become mainstream, a burgeoning culture war has demonized its subject matter. In the past year, lawmakers in at least fifteen states have attempted to ban drag shows, part of a wider queer panic. According to the American Civil Liberties Union, more than four hundred bills that the organization identifies as anti-L.G.B.T.Q.+ are currently under consideration around the country, featuring provisions like curriculum censorship, facilities bans, and mandates that school staff out young people to their families. Drag performances, particularly for child audiences, have recently been cancelled in at least seven countries where "Drag Race" airs. RuPaul, sixty-three, is the world's most famous drag queen, at the helm of one of the world's most far-reaching platforms for queer expression. In conservative

communities around the country and the world, he often serves as a way in to queer culture. And, for those set against that culture, he represents the dangerous spread of liberal ideas. "He's seen the way people connect to the show. That's the way for him to spread the rebuttal to what's happening in the world," Randy Barbato, an executive producer of "Drag Race," said. "His way to ward off the enemy."

One of RuPaul's favorite responses, to anyone who asks how he's doing, is "I don't see how that's any of your business." This is a bit, but it's also something of a life philosophy. "Ru, he is a study in the private and the public self," Barbato said. "He's a public figure. And he's extraordinarily private." I have twice appeared as a judge on the American "Drag Race" programs, but our interviews in England were our first substantive exchanges. In advance, I received anxious calls from mutual friends telling me how much RuPaul hates giving interviews, and when I met him, at Pinewood Studios, almost the first thing out of his mouth was "I fucking hate giving interviews." (The actual first thing he said, after he noticed that I was on crutches, owing to a sprained ankle, was classic "Drag Race" standup: "Fisting accident?" Quoting a contestant on the show, I told him, "There are no accidents in fisting.")

We sat in a small dressing room dominated by RuPaul's hair-and-makeup collection, which covered four plastic picnic tables, and by the man himself, who is six-four but is often thought to be taller, probably on account of all the killer heels. (The celebrated drag queen Lady Bunny once described him as "a six-foot-seven monster-model-woman thing.") RuPaul, on a break between shooting segments in which he would appear out of drag, was without the heels, and instead wore fuzzy gray slippers, a black Abbey Road hoodie, and black workout pants. "I did not think this memoir shit through," he told me, shaking his head. "It's presumptuous that the interviewer can interpret my experience." There's some irony in this: like many reality shows, "Drag Race" is subject to complaints from competitors who feel unfairly reduced to archetypes.

("It's nothing like what happened on set," Phi Phi O'Hara, who was portrayed as hostile toward other contestants, told *New York*.) RuPaul once recorded a song about the complaints, "Blame It on the Edit," singing, "You the one who said it, bitch / How you gon' regret it." To me, he said, "We've had kids come on the show, and we put a camera on them, which can be like a mirror, and they see the reflection of themselves and go, 'Oh, no, that is not who I am. They must have done something to make me look like that.' Like Blanche DuBois, they will not see it, then they will fight to the end to say, 'I was tampered with.' No, we don't do that."

RuPaul's drag and out-of-drag personas on the show are, essentially, characters. In drag, he's the candy-colored, Diana-Ross-meets-Bugs-Bunny-meets-Dolly-Parton character he's built an empire around. (The drag looks featured in each episode take four to six hours to create. His makeup artist, a former contestant named Raven, said, "We do a little brush. We take a break. Coffee talk. O.K., let's get back to it.") In the show's out-of-drag segments, where he introduces challenges or checks in on contestants, offering mentorship and advice, he plays a cheerful, avuncular, professorial type, complete with eyeglasses that he doesn't really need. Both performances offer touches of ribald humor that pay homage to drag's more transgressive roots, while sanding off the sharpest of those edges and putting a wholesome face on the form. "I went Disney when I went mainstream," RuPaul told me. Drag's evolution from edgy night-club revues to family programming has, predictably, spurred criticism. "What was once counterculture has simply become the Culture," E. Alex Jung wrote, in *New York*, in 2019. "This has its benefits: Mainstream consumer culture has gotten a little less straight. But in the process, something—maybe the feeling that this was by us and for us . . . was lost." RuPaul argued that the full spectrum of drag continues to flourish. The form, he told me, "doesn't need defending."

His onscreen personas pull off the trick of revealing—in the show's monomaniacally branded universe, one would say "ru-vealing"—little about

RuPaul himself. Even people who work with him closely can find him distant. His appearances on camera are executed like military strikes; he spends relatively little time with panelists and contestants. "I keep the boundaries," he said. He mentioned a former colleague who worked with him for decades. "We kept a working relationship, we travelled the world together," he said. "But sometimes I would hear her talking to a friend, and she'd be talking about her latest boyfriend. She never did that with me, because I'm her boss. And the truth is, I don't want to hear about it. I don't care about that shit."

One of RuPaul's foundational beliefs is that, as he said, "everybody's playing a role." At times, he plays a nurturing one. A staple of "Drag Race" is an interview that finalists have with RuPaul—it is often a "lunch" conducted over a bowl of Tic Tacs—in which they tell him their hopes and fears, and he dispenses therapeutic wisdom. It's easy to dismiss these exchanges as superficial, but they can be a genuine source of strength for competitors. Jinkx Monsoon recalled that, during their lunch segment, "he was, like, 'You don't need to make yourself smaller for other people. . . . And he said that, and it was amazing, because it did make me feel like, Oh, I don't have to feel guilty for being talented."

At other times, RuPaul can appear cold, a quality born of painful experience. "So much of our culture today, with young people, is centered around their

feelings," he told me. "Feelings are indicators, they're not facts." He went on, "Parents teaching their kids about safe spaces, and 'I feel uncomfortable' . . . It's, like, You know what? The world is not a safe space. You have to find the comfort. It's mostly uncomfortable." He told me that he has never wanted children. "I don't like kids," he said flatly.

RuPaul was born in San Diego in 1960, the third of four children and the only boy, and brought up in a yellow three-bedroom tract house, one of four models in a housing development called Michelle Manor. According to family lore, before he was born a fortune-teller told his mother, Ernestine, that the baby would be famous. Ernestine introduced him to his aunts by saying, "His name is RuPaul and he's going to be a star."

"I was always anointed," he told me. "I know it sounds obnoxious. But I knew from childhood I was the golden child." His father, Irving, who worked as an electrician at an aerospace company, was a charming philanderer with a gambling problem. Ernestine, who was of Creole descent, was flinty and aloof, with an immaculate sense of style. Her eviscerating barbs earned her the nickname Mean Miss Charles among the neighborhood kids. "She was a mess," one of Ru's older sisters, Renetta, has said, referring to their mother's temper. "Said what she felt, meant what she said, and you dealt with it." The parents' fights could be cataclysmic. At one point, Ernestine poured gasoline over Irving's convertible, an Oldsmobile Delta 88, and threatened him with a matchbook. RuPaul told me, "They were embroiled in their own two battling nations, and I'm in the middle. So I learned how to be a diplomat and read the situation and go, 'Oh, can't say that. How can I say it? I'll say it like this.' It's a dissociative thing that we do to protect ourselves, to not make it personal."

Irving and Ernestine divorced when RuPaul was seven, and afterward he didn't see much of his father, whose absence he often describes as a primal trauma. Living with his mother, he witnessed her slide into depression and her sorrow

at having allowed herself to be vulnerable enough to be heartbroken—a "softness," RuPaul writes in "The House of Hidden Meanings," that she viewed as an "Achilles' heel." The complicated and forthright portrayal of her in the book is one of its strongest aspects. "It's my mother," he told me, about his own guardedness. "She said I'm way too sensitive. And she was absolutely right. So my job for a lot of time has been to hide the fact that I'm too sensitive."

Attempting to appeal to his mother, through her often Valium-laced distance, RuPaul would impersonate his favorite divas, wrapping a towel around his head to channel Tina Turner and LaWanda Page, who played Aunt Esther on "Sanford and Son." (Page later featured on the closest thing RuPaul's had to a mainstream radio hit, "Supermodel (You Better Work)," from 1992, providing the song's spoken-word narration about a Black girl escaping from poverty into a life of glamour.) Performance soon became a kind of protection. "I never fit in," he said. "I wasn't one of the most desired things on the hit list." Television offered an escape, and early affirmation of his belief that everyone, everywhere, was playing a character. He liked "Mission: Impossible," with its complex nesting of disguises, each a layer of defense.

In 1976, when RuPaul was fifteen, he moved to Atlanta with Renetta, who was in her early twenties. They were part of a wave of Black newcomers seeking economic opportunity. He enrolled at the Northside School of Performing Arts, where he appeared in drag for the first time onstage, in the Tennessee Williams play "Camino Real." After dropping out, he came into contact with the drag scene at a disco called Numbers, where he watched a queen named Crystal LaBeija lip-synch to Donna Summer's "Bad Girls." By the eighties, Atlanta was "drag heaven," Lady Bunny told *The New Yorker*, in 1993. "Midtown Atlanta was a very gay scene. They had transvestite hookers all over the streets day and night. When we started out, the Southern queens were deadly serious, without a shred of humor." But RuPaul embraced a genre of

drag now known as "genderfuck," a catchall term for aesthetics that are designed to poke fun at gender norms. In "The House of Hidden Meanings," he describes the look as "mohawk-and-extensions, tribal apocalyptic Thunderdome."

Drag brought RuPaul his earliest sense of community, uniting him with kindred misfits. But, with his striking height and confidence, and his new look, he also stood apart. "I thought he had, like, fallen out of the sky," Larry Tee, the d.j. and club promoter, who was one of his close friends and collaborators during that period, later said. "I thought he was an alien." In those years, RuPaul was in a constant state of creative self-promotion. He started a series of musical groups, first performing as RuPaul and the U-Hauls, then as Wee Wee Pole. (He made some of his earliest costumes on Renetta's sewing machine —"tasteful ones," he writes, "like leopard-print catsuits with fringe down the side.") He began performing as a go-go dancer, then created his own avant-garde drag revues, which he brought to New York clubs like the Pyramid and Illusions. He advertised these appearances with posters bearing catchphrases like "RUPAUL IS EVERYTHING" and "RUPAUL IS RED HOT," which he taped to telephone poles. "I have never met anyone in my life that is as driven as RuPaul," the performer known as Flloyd, another friend from that era, later told a documentarian. "The first day I met him, we drank a whole bottle of Jack Daniel's and I was laying on the couch going, 'Uhhh,' and Ru was, like, 'Let's go to Kinko's! Let's make posters of me!' "

The early performances could be political, and often framed drag as liberation from oppressive norms. He opened one show, at the Pyramid Club, as a slave on a plantation. "I hate being a slave," he said, in a breathy, Marilyn Monroe stage whisper. Then he rose to his feet, swimming in mismatched oversized layers of leopard print, crimped hair wild, intoning in a baritone, "I'm a slave. And you're a slave. And we're just gonna break out."

He put himself in front of cameras whenever he could; once, he wrote to an Atlanta public-access variety program called "The American Music Show" and insisted that, since he would soon be a star, he should be booked as a guest. The hosts of the program had never had anyone write to them before. RuPaul soon became a regular. With friends, including Lady Bunny, he made micro-budget short films on Super 8, among them the sexed-up slasher "Trilogy of Terror," based on the anthology starring Karen Black. Another series of shorts, "Starbooty," followed, with RuPaul playing a model turned spy in the mold of blaxploitation divas like Cleopatra Jones, reinterpreted in his "Mad Max" aesthetic. "Really, it was just an excuse to change clothes," Jon Witherspoon, the director of "Starbooty," later recalled.

In the mid-eighties, when RuPaul was making frequent trips between Atlanta and New York, he met Barbato and Fenton Bailey, who were in a pop act called the Fabulous Pop Tarts but had aspirations to be filmmakers. They have different memories of the first encounter. Bailey told me that he was in a car in Atlanta, and, turning a corner, was confronted by an indelible image: "in the headlights of the car, there was this extraordinary creature pasting these posters." Barbato recalled meeting him in the lobby of the Marriott Marquis, in Times Square. "He had football shoulder pads on, thigh-high waders, you know, rubber wading boots, and he was dressed like such a freak," Barbato said. "And it was like seeing a huge star. I was dazzled."

RuPaul spent Memorial Day of 1986 with Barbato and Bailey in a studio in Manhattan, recording an album built around the "Starbooty" character. "Ru always, always had specific ideas of 'I want this to sound like that,' like, he knew music so well," Barbato said. ("The House of Hidden Meanings" is, among other things, a love letter to RuPaul's musical inspirations—the songs referenced throughout make up a playlist of about six hours, with cuts of classic rock, disco, and nineties R. & B.) A few years after "Starbooty," Barbato co-directed the music video for "Supermodel," which featured RuPaul vamping

around New York, chanting "Sashay, shanté," before having a slapstick nervous breakdown, replete with snarling and wig-snatching. The song reached No. 1 on *Billboard's* dance singles chart, and the video was nominated for an MTV Video Music Award for best dance video. (It lost to En Vogue's "Free Your Mind.")

RuPaul's earliest collaborations with Barbato and Bailey are among their most winning. For Channel 4, in the U.K., the trio worked on a gonzo cable-news series titled "Manhattan Cable." RuPaul served as a field correspondent. In one segment, he walked around downtown Manhattan, like Dan Rather in a faux-cheetah coat and platform heels, collecting the stories of sex workers. "The meat market is filled with transvestite hookers by night," RuPaul tells the camera. And then, with a figurative wink: "Maybe I'll make my rent money." His exchanges with the sex workers are frank and sensitive. He likes them, and they seem to like him. As a punch line, he gets into a client's car and drives off.

The team has continued to build projects around RuPaul ever since. After experiments in different genres—"The RuPaul Show," a talk show he hosted in full drag, ran on VH1 for a hundred episodes from 1996 to 1998—in the early aughts they devised, with another producer, Tom Campbell, the idea that would become "Drag Race." RuPaul was initially reluctant. "There was the meeting where Ru was, like, I'll do anything but a reality competition show," Bailey told me. But eventually he was won over. "Drag was perceived as some crazy novelty," Barbato said. "Ru understood having the familiarity of a competition format would help us give something familiar to the networks." Every platform they pitched passed on the show, except for the L.G.B.T.Q.+ channel Logo TV, where "Drag Race" ran for eight seasons, becoming the network's most watched program, before moving to VH1 and then to MTV.

As RuPaul became more popular, he changed his look to a less challenging

aesthetic that he refers to as "high-femme Glamazon." He writes about the first time he performed in a more feminine costume, at a wedding-themed drag show, where he wore a white strapless dress with a Dior-style cinched waist. He felt "some energy shift . . . I was finally getting sexual attention." The early forays into aggressive femininity represented his "Black-hooker phase," he told me. "I don't know if that's politically correct . . . but that was my look. It was like a 'Soul Train' dancer." By the time of "Supermodel," however, he was moving away from such overt sexuality. The décolletage was becoming more modest, the gowns more polished. "I desexualized all the way," he told me. The change was not universally welcomed. It "caused a bit of a tiff from the other drag queens who he'd come up with in New York. They kind of labelled it as 'RuPaul goes to the mall.' They were all angry," Jimmy Harry, who co-wrote "Supermodel," once said. "But I think that was necessary for him to kind of become a commercial entity."

RuPaul's rise has made him a target for criticism within the queer community. In an interview with the *Guardian*, in 2018, he wondered whether physically transitioned transgender women should compete on the show. "Probably not," he said. "It takes on a different thing; it changes the whole concept of what we're doing." The show has long featured transgender competitors, but early seasons were dominated by those who identified as gay, male, and cisgender. Gia Gunn, a contestant, told *New York*, "There were trans women who were putting their transitions on hold and purposely not taking hormones leading up to the show." Another contestant, Monica Beverly Hillz, told the queer Web site Them that, after a struggle to fund her transition through sex work, "Drag Race helped me escape that world, but their world was never really made for me either." More recent seasons have had transgender winners, including Kylie Sonique Love, Willow Pill, and Sasha Colby. "I didn't have a single issue," Jinkx Monsoon, who identified as transfemme during her most recent win on the show, told me. "Every season, it becomes more and more mindful of what's

going on in the actual drag world. . . . People want to call Ru transphobic. And I just think that's really hard for me to believe, given Ru's history." In "The House of Hidden Meanings," RuPaul describes a life in drag entwined with trans performers, a community he speaks of with apparent affection. But he has built a career on sidestepping gender norms in a way that involves ignoring identity labels, which can be in tension with contemporary discourse. He doesn't much like to talk about the issue. "Gender is a concept that we come up with, in our minds and our egos," he told me. "My genitals are male. But I can be whatever I can. I feel I'm everything. You are everything. You are male, female. Sometimes I feel more male than others."

Criticism also followed an interview with NPR, in 2020, in which he suggested that fracking, an environmentally destructive practice used to extract fossil fuels, was taking place on his husband's Wyoming ranch. RuPaul remains defiantly annoyed about the matter. "Do you buy gas?" he said to me. "Before you point the finger, smell it first, bitch." He sounds weary when discussing these controversies. "There's no combination of words I can put together that would soothe the mob," he said.

Sam Lansky, a writer who helped RuPaul with "The House of Hidden Meanings," told me, "He has been, in some ways, sort of misread in terms of his beliefs, or his politics," contributing to "a world-weariness that he has, and this kind of pessimism that everything is gonna go bad."

In the memoir, RuPaul treats most celebrities he's encountered with diplomacy, if not reverence. An exception is Madonna, whom he describes giving him a "snarl of contempt" at a club in the eighties. "In aging, there is a natural flow," he told me. "And, when you're against the flow, it doesn't look right, it doesn't feel right. The energy around the Madonna thing—it feels weird, right?" He referred to "chasing arena tours and grills in your teeth." He added, "I'm not interested in appealing to eleven-to-twenty-five-year-olds, I'm just not. I can,

on a bigger level, as a mother. As Mama Ru. It's a different relationship—I'm not trying to be them."

At Pinewood, RuPaul emerged from a bathroom, decked out for a non-drag segment of the show in a Trina Turk suit with a swirling, psychedelic maroon print. Thairin Smothers, one of his producers, handed him a paper cup of hot water with lemon, then followed him into a TV studio. Under fuchsia lights, a set for "Snatch Game," a sendup of "Match Game," awaited. In the segment, a staple of "Drag Race," a panel of contestants, each impersonating a celebrity, attempts to complete a phrase, trying to match answers provided by celebrity guests. The episode's guests were Rachel Stevens and John Lee, of the pop group S Club. Opposite them sat drag renditions of Elvis Presley, Liza Minnelli, Marie Antoinette, a dragon, and other characters. RuPaul, cue cards in hand, set them up for witty comebacks to questions.

This was a light makeup day: for non-drag segments, RuPaul applies his own eyebrows, using four different products. Raven, the makeup artist, was nevertheless watching the monitors in case touch-ups were needed. She told me that she had worked with RuPaul on seven seasons of television in 2023 alone. "I literally fill a suitcase, go home, fill another suitcase, go again," she said. Smothers corrected her. "Lingo," a game show on CBS that RuPaul began hosting last year, had made a season, too. "It all kind of blends together after seventeen years," Smothers said, watching the monitors. Many of the "Drag

Race" staff have worked on the show for a decade or more. For all RuPaul's boundary-setting, the atmosphere can be unusually familial for TV. Under the lights at Pinewood, the queen playing Liza Minnelli tried out an old standard, snapping, "I don't see how that's any of your business," and RuPaul howled with laughter.

A few days later, RuPaul woke up and performed his morning ritual. First, he stretched. "I'm older," he said. "I have to make sure everything is doing the thing." Then he prayed, saying aloud the words "Dear God, thank you," followed by things for which he is grateful. That week, the list included the roof over his head, his access to running water, and Georges, his husband, whom he met while dancing at Limelight, in New York, in the nineties. After that, he meditated, a practice that can last anywhere from forty-five seconds to fifteen minutes. He lets the ideas drift through: "Oh, there's my father. Oh, there's Judy Garland." His demons are there, too, but he claims to have befriended them. He put on another black hoodie and another pair of black workout pants and walked ten minutes to the nearest Marks & Spencer to pick up an apple turnover.

Soon afterward, we sat in the living room of his rental cottage, a modest, two-story structure with neutral walls and a tiny kitchenette to which he had added, as far as I could tell, nothing but a row of identical boxes of berry-flavored Special K. "I brought this in," he said, pointing to an LCD monitor that sat, with his laptop, on an otherwise empty white desk. "And I moved this chair. That's about it." Yet he was crazy about the place—he liked the flow of the floor plan, and took pictures of it, to try to replicate it in Wyoming.

RuPaul is, in profound ways, a loner. For much of his adult life, he had felt alienated from the easy intimacy of casual gay sex. "In my twenties and stuff, when I was meeting someone at a bar or something, I always would want to find some type of connection, but it was not there," he said. "And I did not

enjoy being with somebody I don't have a connection to."

His Black identity didn't furnish much sense of community, either. "I come from a Black family," he said. "But I always felt different. Not better or anything. I just felt like Ru." In the memoir, he recounts a moment, two years after his move to Atlanta, when his father grilled him about rumors that he was having gay sex. "In the Black church, 'gay' represents something against the family, and the family is an extension of how Black people survived from slavery," he told me. "So my existence becomes a threat to the family, because I'm *other than*." I expected that he would suggest that he now relishes his role as a trailblazing celebrity in the Black community. "I've won fourteen Emmys. And you would think I'd have been on the cover of *Ebony*, if that still exists," he said. "I don't represent what the Black community wants to lift up. I never have." His computer's desktop showed a black-and-white closeup of Diana Ross. From an early age, he admired her ability to craft an image that was unthreatening to white audiences. "I went, That's what I want to do. I want to be on a world stage and not be questioned, or make people feel threatened," he said. "Most Black people in our culture have to not scare white folks."

RuPaul told me that his social life is circumscribed, in some ways, by design. "I meet new people, but like, socially, do I go out to dinner with people, or meet someone and say, 'Hey, let's go on a hike'? Very rarely." He and his husband have an open relationship. "It's just realistic," he said. "There's no such thing as monogamy with men." But, he said, because of his fame, there's no longer "a circle of people that I can sort of rely on" for intimacy.

When Georges and he first met, Georges asked if he could floss RuPaul's teeth. RuPaul, horrified, said no. But Georges eventually got past his guardedness. While I was with RuPaul, Georges FaceTimed him from a hospital room, where he was recovering from a minor medical procedure. "Oh, my God, look at you," RuPaul said. "Did you get the morphine I told you to get?" And then:

"I love you." At one point, while we were talking, RuPaul mentioned his name, smiled, and then started to cry.

"I would love to have more fun," he told me. "I would love to go to a fucking roller disco. Why aren't there fucking roller discos? What's the deal? People have lost track of what's really fun." RuPaul has his own skates, and he's nimble. Occasionally, he will drive to a remote parking lot and skate by himself. But he finds the kind of night life he once loved to be inaccessible. "You know, at a night club or at a disco dance place, people are on their phones," he said. "How am I going to be spiritual and in the moment, sweating, and take my shirt off, where there are people filming?"

Lansky, the writer, described to me what he thought of as RuPaul's foundational beliefs: "Don't take anything too seriously. Don't treat anything as sacred. Stay in play, nurture your inner child." For all its profitability, "Drag Race" still ropes contestants into campy, small-budget music-video shoots that mirror his own experiments on "The American Music Show," in Atlanta: creations with little artistry and lots of cheap wigs and improv. Before he dropped out of high school, a drama teacher scolded him for caring about his precarious academic career, telling him, "RuPaul, don't take life too fucking seriously." The admonition has since become a mantra. "I'm always looking to play," he said. "I want to be in that state all the time."

RuPaul has been sober since the late nineties. In "The House of Hidden Meanings," he describes years of alcohol abuse that he now views as an effort to "anesthetize" himself, and also his eventual decision to seek treatment, spurred by his effort to help Georges, who was addicted to crystal meth. But he remains a proponent of psychedelics, and told me that early acid trips provided essential perspective on the importance of being in a state of play. "That's why hallucinogens are so wonderful. Because your self-consciousness is stripped away when you're tripping your balls," he said. The spiritual guru he finds most

influential, he said, is "my fucking idol, Bugs Bunny. Who is a fucking Zen master." His teachings: "Don't take other people too serious. And stay ahead of their stupidity. If you have to, build a fucking compound somewhere, but stay ahead of their own self-destructive, ridiculous mentality."

RuPaul has been trying to outrun that kind of thinking for a long time. He recalled an appearance he made, in full drag, on "The Arsenio Hall Show," in 1993—a radical act, at the time. "In the moment, on 'Arsenio Hall,' I'm up against the status quo and the machine," he recalled. "There is pain in that."

He got up and served me the apple turnover. With his face shadowed by the hoodie and bare of makeup, he looked ascetic and almost otherworldly. He told me he'd been reflecting on his comment about not liking kids. "I would be a great parent," he said. Though he would fear sending a child into a world he finds inhospitable and dangerous, he added, "I would love that kid so much." The cottage is near a school. "The bell just rang," he said. "You know, last year, when I took this place, I thought, Oh, God, the kids, they're gonna drive me crazy." Now, he told me, "I fucking love hearing their voices out there. It's kind of this white noise of joy." ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated Randy Barbato's role in directing the music video for "Supermodel."

Published in the print edition of the March 11, 2024, issue, with the headline "Role Play."

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Ronan Farrow, a contributing writer at The New Yorker, won the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for public service. His 2025 podcast "Not a Very Good Murderer" explores his fact-checking process with a volatile source.

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